



## AUSTRALIAN COMMANDO ASSOCIATION VICTORIA

### AUSTRALIAN SPECIAL WARFARE ORAL HISTORIES

#### **Interview Number 1. Brigadier 'Mac' Grant OAM, RFD 2/5<sup>TH</sup> and 2/12<sup>TH</sup> Commando Squadrons and post war Commando and Special Operations.**

#### **Lieutenant Colonel G.B. Courtney MBE, MC Headquarters, Special Operations Australia**

**Brigadier Mac Grant:** Since the dawn of history, the indigenous peoples of countries under siege have banded together to repel invaders, because the regular forces, if indeed they ever existed, were more often than not defeated. Local resistance by the population took the form of non-regular or what we now call irregular warfare. Countries whose national interests were at odds with those of the invading countries or were themselves invaders soon realized the value of supporting local irregular forces against the common enemy.

During the centuries of colonial expansion by European countries, it became commonplace for those powers to use local forces. Probably the most noteworthy example of this was during the 18th century when both the British and the French enlisted the North American Indians to fight on their own soil. During the same period, the American Revolutionaries and the British forces fighting the war of independence used Indians extensively.

Napoleon's Spanish campaign in the early 19th century is noteworthy for several reasons. It was the first instance in comparatively modern times when a protagonist in a major war provided large-scale support to irregulars against another major power. Britain supported the Spanish guerrillas in their resistance to the French invasion. The result was to tire down a large part of the French army in a long-drawn-out campaign with no real hope of success.

The word guerrilla used to describe an irregular soldier derives from the Spanish word [Spanish word], literally meaning a small war soldier. Also, from the so-called Peninsular War came the principle accepted to this day, that outside support by a major power is essential to the survival of a guerrilla movement. While the Western Front of World War One [00:02:00] saw two great armies locked in a four-year battle from the English Channel to Switzerland, there was no opportunity for irregular warfare.

However, the British used the long-standing animosity of the Arabs towards the Turks to their advantage. Lawrence of Arabia led a guerrilla campaign using Arab irregulars armed and supplied by Britain to assist in the defeat of Turkey. This offensive is acknowledged as a classic of its kind. Indeed, many of the principles of irregular warfare that we teach today, derive from Lawrence's campaign.

The early disasters of World War Two resulted in the complete German-Italian domination of the European continent. This was combined with the Japanese occupation of a substantial part of Asia. These situations provided the setting for



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irregular warfare at a previously undreamt-of level. From the cross-channel raids by British commandos following Churchill's famous dictate to set Europe ablaze, to the activities of the local resistance forces in virtually every occupied country.

The British soon realized that a controlling body was required and formed the Special Operations Executive. Later, when the Americans entered the field, they implemented an equivalent organization called the Office of Strategic Services. It was to be the forerunner of the CIA. Today, the term Special Operations is used to describe most forms of Irregular Warfare.

Australia's entry into Special Operations came in 1941 when a British Military Mission headed by Lieutenant Colonel Mawhood advised Australia's military on the raising and training of special volunteer units to be known as Independent Companies. Initially, these units were trained at Wilsons Promontory in Victoria, under the direction of two other members of the British commission, Captains Mike Calvert and Spencer Chapman.

The exploits of 2/2nd and 2/4th Independent Companies in Timor and 2/5th in the Wau, Salamaua area of New Guinea are well-known [00:04:00]. While Independent Companies were Australian Army units which operated unconventionally, they did not come under the category of the Special Operations. They were the Australian equivalents of the British Army and Royal Marine commandos operating in Europe.

In fact, these Independent Companies were re-designated as Commando Squadrons later in the war. Along with the formation of these units, was the development of the Coastwatcher Organization. This group existed in the islands to the north of Australia prior to World War Two. Consisting mainly of civilians, the Coastwatcher's performed invaluable service in the early stages of the Pacific War, reporting on Japanese air and shipping movements.

They were eventually absorbed into M Special Unit, but it was not until the creation of the Special Reconnaissance Department (SRD) in April of 1943 that Australia entered the world of clandestine irregular operations. Lieutenant Colonel Courtney explains.

**[00:05:56]. Lieutenant Colonel 'Jumbo' Courtney:** SOA, that is Special Operations Australia, was established in Australia in March or April in 1942 by General Blamey. With the approval of General MacArthur, was given the cover name of the Inter-Allied Services Department, ISD for short. Its administrative wing was designated Z Special Unit responsible for all Australian servicemen and women. A few SOE trained British officers who had escaped from Malaya were sent to Australia to start the organization from scratch.

As there was no knowledge of Special Warfare at that time amongst Australian Military Forces or the Americans, in order to coordinate and control the various allied intelligence organizations here, GHQ SWPA, that is Southwest Pacific Area created the Allied Intelligence Bureau, [00:06:00] (AIB) in June 1942. GHQ SWPA was suspicious of SOA as a British trojan horse, which had been established with the ultimate object of regaining British colonial possessions lost to the Japanese, rather than to assist MacArthur to return to the Philippines.



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Fundamental disagreements regarding SOA's role was to result in continued friction between SOA and GHQ through AIB, and the denial to the former of long-range aircraft and submarines during 1942 and 1943. This continued until the latter half of 1944. Only short-range intelligence missions could be undertaken, and GHQ showed no understanding or appreciation of SOE's proper function as practitioners of special warfare.

In March 1943, the commanding officer, that is Colonel Mott of SOA-ISD was sacked by GHQ, and the unit was renamed the Services Reconnaissance Department, SRD with another British officer from SOE in London sent out to command a certain Colonel Chapman Walker. Friction continued and intensified thereafter culminating in July 1944, with an attempt by GHQS AIB to remove the current British CO. This failed through the intervention of General Blamey who acted throughout SOA's history as its great supporter.

In fact, they were very much helped by General Herring and General Steele as well. It became evident that successful development and survival of a special force unit requires a big daddy at the top of the military tree, who has a thorough appreciation of its correct use and potential. It was not until [00:08:00] the beginning of 1945, that SOA SRD came under control of the AMF, that's the Australian Military Forces in direct support of their plans for coping with bypass Japanese Garrisons in New Guinea, the Halmahera, the Celebes, and British and Dutch Borneo.

Thereafter, it was better supplied by long-range aircraft and submarine transport and able to carry out the tactical intelligence in guerrilla warfare roles for which it had been trained and intended.

**Brigadier Mac Grant:** all Because of the friction between the allies and the services themselves, it took some time for the SRD now more widely known as the Z Special Unit to commence operations. In general terms, Z Special Unit was designed to conduct SOE type operations. It is perhaps best known for Operation JAYWICK and Operation RIMAU, the two raids against Japanese shipping in Singapore harbor.

Not as well-known are the numerous other operations conducted in Borneo, New Guinea, and what is now Indonesia. Like SOE operations in occupied Europe, these engagements involved infiltration of Japanese occupied areas, where local inhabitants were recruited. The SOE recruits assisted in harassing operations against the Japanese. It was claimed that Z Special Unit operations in Borneo caused more Japanese casualties than the combined efforts of the Seventh and Ninth Australian divisions.

Australia had no equivalent of the British Special Air Service until 1957 when the decision was made to raise an SAS company. Since then, of course, the SAS company has expanded to become the SAS regiment. 1 and 2 Commando Companies, initially raised in 1955, have since been combined with 126 Signal Squadron to become 1<sup>ST</sup> Commando Regiment. All this highlights the fact that the commitment to Special Operations is very much an integral part of Australia's defense policy and strategy [00:10:00].



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Even though the SRD and the Independent Company operations happened nearly 50 years ago, the lessons learned then are just as applicable to Special Warfare now.

The main objectives of this series of programs are firstly, to form a reference for students of special warfare today, and to ensure that the lessons learned by the men you see interviewed and others were not wasted.

The task confronting us is to combine these lessons with a degree of battle thinking and the application of modern-day technology. Special Operations are often tri-service in nature and the topics covered reflect this. Finally, the efforts of many members of the 1<sup>st</sup> Commando Regiment have led to the production of this wonderful resource. However, I will mention two, in particular, David Sheehan and Steve Pilmore have been largely responsible for this project's completion.

The first interview is with Lieutenant Colonel Jumbo Courtney.

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